

---

Democracy on Trial

Author(s): John Howland

Source: *The Journal of Race Development*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Jan., 1914), pp. 293-301

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29737997>

Accessed: 27-07-2014 22:02 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



<http://www.jstor.org>

## DEMOCRACY ON TRIAL

*By John Howland, D.D., President of Colegio Internacional, Guadalajara, Mexico*

In the opinion of some students of history, democracy is but one stage in the invariable and inescapable cycle of political growth: autocracy, constitutional monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, and anarchy leading back to absolutism; the only possible variation being the length of the different periods, which will be dependent on special local conditions. Others, while not attempting to elude or minimize the historical testimony, would affirm that the lapse from democracy to an anarchy which finds its remedy only by a return to absolutism is by no means a necessity, but simply an accident, owing to defective conditions in previous stages; and that, at the worst, the movement is not a cycle but an ascending spiral in which the former stage is simply approached but at a much higher level, having eliminated much that held it down and back, carrying with it much of the good it has won out of the past and ever approaching more and more the straight tangent which will be the perfect and permanent democracy. Under every system since men first congregated, the strong have ruled the weak; but side by side with the rude fact of power have grown the ideals of fellowship and justice, and these have helped to correct the inequality and injustice which condition human life.

The struggle has been two-fold: to limit more and more the power of the ruler, and to introduce a larger and more effective participation of the people in public affairs. Hence we find two conceptions of democracy, not mutually exclusive but still fundamentally distinct: the one based on social equality, and the other the simple vesting of power in the people. The former is undoubtedly the most frequently entertained: and the cry of "Liberty, Fraternity, Equality," is the one which finds the quickest and most ardent response

in the sympathies of the people. Not only is it the more popular, but doubtless it must be conceded to occupy a higher moral plane, for the latter tends to lead to the former; that is, the vesting of power in all should result in the minimizing, if not in the obliteration, of all degrading or oppressive inequalities. No country can attain real and permanent progress as long as any class, be it high or low, fails through ignorance or indifference to respond to the call of patriotism, whether that call be to the field of battle or to the quieter but more strenuous struggle for the attainment of individual perfection and the fulfilment of personal obligations.

In the republics of ancient times and in most of those of the present, the adoption of democracy was a transition from a previous condition, so that the republican form had to be superimposed on elements that were more or less refractory. The United States has the unique position of being a republic in which the general character of its government was prepared before the nation came into being. The determinative element in the formation of the new race was a group of the descendants of those who had already fought valiantly for liberty and wrested successive concessions from the reluctant crown. When independence was secured for the English colonies, they had only to formulate and publish the principles that had already actuated them from the first. So, naturally, the new republic moved forward with scarcely a jar or tremor in its course.

This difference of origin is often overlooked in judging the progress and attainment of other republics. Because they do not correspond in every detail to the form that the United States has elaborated, they are considered defective or abnormal. It is easy to forget that a republican form of government furnishes no guarantee against tyranny and that a monarchy is not inconsistent with a high degree of political freedom. The writer of the article on democracy in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* does not hesitate to claim that Great Britain is the best type extant of a true democracy and that from her have come the ideals that have led to the establishment of republics, though none of them have attained to the height of the parent country. He calls the French

Republic "bureaucratic," and those in Latin America "despotic." Cavour in Piedmont, working for the freedom and unity of Italy, deliberately rejected the republican form and labored for a constitutional monarchy, established by the coöperation of France. He did this at the cost of losing the coöperation and even of encountering the fanatical opposition of Mazzini and other Italian patriots, but the result would seem to have fully justified his views.

With nations as with individuals there must be a reckoning with inherited tendencies and characteristics. Latin American republics were originally colonial dependencies. They were not colonies founded, as was the great republic of the north, by men who fled from oppression to seek greater freedom in a wilderness: but by those who were sent out to exploit new lands for the benefit of the crown. The only examples they had of government were, in most cases, marked by greed, graft, favoritism, and an utter disregard for the welfare of the colonies themselves. The democratic idea of rulers chosen by the people, responsible to the people, and administering the government with disinterested devotion to the welfare of the people, was practically unknown among them. What wonder, then, that office should have been sought not for the opportunity for service, for the honor, nor even for the salary, but mainly for the openings it offered for personal enrichment. It is always hard to break with hoary traditions; and even when they have been cast off, their influence often persists for an indefinite time.

It would not be easy to find a greater contrast than that which exists between a feudal system and a true democracy; and the existence of greatly concentrated wealth or extreme poverty, of privileges of birth or of ecclesiastical position, must always be a menace to republican institutions. But these conditions had been brought from Europe and firmly implanted on American soil and had to be taken into account by the new-born republic which sprang up under the influence of that wave of sentiment which, during the first half of the last century, threatened all thrones, even the most firmly established ones of Europe. Where these things exist, even as a memory or as a wish, they are sure sooner or later to

come into conflict with a democratic form of government and some way of adjustment must be found or the government will be overthrown.

Racial prejudice wields a mighty influence in the opinion peoples form of each other. It has been well said that "The portrait that one nation paints of another is likely to appear a libel or a caricature to the sitter." It is not, however, mere prejudice; for each race has its own peculiarities. The Saxon is phlegmatic, reflective, patient of delay, willing to wait for the slow processes of human experience. The Latin blood is fervid, and quickly boils at meeting opposition. The Saxon patriot wages his warfare and bides his time, confident that he is aligned on the side of truth and justice, and that these are destined to triumph at the last, however much they may be sidetracked, misrepresented or perverted for a time. If the party of opposition wins an election, he watches those thus chosen to arrest every false or devious step with the machinery of the law, and even when this fails, he sets himself to use the legal remedy—the election of cleaner executives and a more upright judiciary. He realizes that a people has only the government that it chooses, or at least consents to have; so that, to reform abuses or correct errors, it is necessary to educate public opinion or awaken public sentiment. He knows that victory obtained otherwise will be specious, momentary, and finally delusive. The Latin-American, with his more vivid imagination, sees only final ruin in everything that delays, diverts or defeats that for which he is laboring. He expects all to see things from his point of view and with the same enthusiasm. He is impatient of the process of slowly, methodically and persistently shaping the opinions of his compatriots. As in his personal difficulties he is quick to have recourse to the poniard, so in his political disappointments he trusts more naturally to an appeal to arms than to a prolonged campaign for subsequent elections. Instead of the joy that his impassive Saxon neighbor feels in carrying on a prolonged struggle for some principle, he enters the contest with boundless enthusiasm, but if not immediately successful, easily relapses into complete discouragement or lets his disappointment degenerate into a

personal feud against his political opponent. The Saxon, from his boyhood, is trained even in his play, in "team work," the spirit of coöperation which seeks union on common principles and purposes and with ease passes over personal preferences and slights in pursuance of the greater good. The Latin is more personal; everyone for himself. If he can not carry his point, he may yield with more or less of grace to another; but finds it difficult to combine or coöperate with that other. The difference is seen very markedly in commercial enterprises. Among Saxons combination has reached such limits and attained such colossal success as to seriously menace the stability of governments and the well-being of the common people. Commercial combinations among the Latins are apt to be of short duration. Their traditions and tastes point rather to the building up of a "house," where there shall be one dominant name and interest, and all the rest subservient to that.

History shows that political greatness and permanence must ever depend on well distributed economic and industrial development. The granting of great concessions and subsidies to powerful companies is beneficial in a way, because it develops resources hitherto unproductive: but it easily becomes a menace to the real prosperity of a nation in more ways than one. Frequently, if not usually, such concessions are given to foreigners, so that most of the gain is taken out of the country in which it is produced and then, too, international complications are liable to come up at any time. Such concessions also discourage competition and the wider development of national resources. Life comes from the ground, and only as agriculture is extended, improved and put into the hands of the greatest possible number can a nation hope for lasting prosperity. Ways must be found for the avoidance of or the breaking up of excessively large estates, but this is worse than useless unless the small owner is educated and protected, so that he will not lose through lack of thrift, wisdom, or legal security what he may have acquired. Every citizen who owns no taxable property is a menace to the state. Usually, his impecunious situation reveals a lack of intelligence, sobriety, or willingness to work,

which in themselves make him a source of danger; and his poverty makes him an easy prey to the demagogue, the politician or the revolutionist. In the colonization of the northern republic the character of the country and the traditions of the greater part of the colonists favored small holdings of land and the development of rural communities. To the south, conditions were different: large grants of land were made to individuals, and wealthy investors bought extensive tracts, thus making competition by a small proprietor difficult if not impossible. Climatic and territorial conditions make it necessary to undertake expensive projects of irrigation, far beyond the possibilities of the man of moderate means. Lack of transportation also puts the small producer at the mercy of the wholesale dealer who can afford to wait for months or years to realize his profits. The traditional method of holding land by Latin peoples of limited resources was the community system. This trained the indigenous population in an easy-going lack of anxiety for the future, and checked all their ambition. The family could not lose its right to tillage, pasture, and wood; nor could anyone acquire a largely greater wealth than others because all had equal rights. Experience has shown that the result of the breaking up of these ancient communities is that land sharks secure the titles to the larger part of them, as the former holders have had no training in that jealous protection of their real estate from all encumbrance or danger of loss, which is the secret of the existence of an extensive and intelligent rural population.

The security of a democracy will always be proportional to the extent of the intelligent participation of all of its citizens. There may be a stage of transition, more or less prolonged, in which the intelligent few may govern the acquiescing but ignorant masses, or as it has been expressed "a majority of brains ruling a majority as counted by noses," but such a condition is always fraught with danger and must be finally disastrous unless steady progress is made towards the education of all the people. Extreme poverty that results in practical serfdom and lack of aspiration that leaves the masses of the people illiterate, furnish a serious problem



for any progressive government, but especially for those that aim toward the democratic form. There is always the danger that the high ideal of democracy become a simple fetich, that the ideal degenerate into the idol. Academic education is not sufficient. In a race that is gifted with a vivid imagination and which never lacks for words in which to voice its thoughts, there is always the danger that the appeal will be to the passions and that the thrill it produces will be a kind of intoxication that is irrevocably followed by a depressing and degrading reaction, instead of leading to more intelligent and resolute action. Popular education, to be sane, must "speak directly to the reason, enlighten, kindle, free and teach how strength of soul may show itself in sane acts." It has been said that the individual that ceases to react to the facts of life is to be judged insane. Measured by such a standard, many republics have to reckon with a large insane element which constitutes a grave danger. Centuries ago, Plato affirmed that rational discussion was the only protection against errors and untested ideas; but the ability to calmly define terms, analyze and clearly state one's own opinions and those that differ from ours, see and show the logical coherence of the one and the real defects of the other, comes only by study and experience. Till it is acquired, there will always be dissension and turmoil instead of union and progress.

Having noted some of the more important points of difference in the conditions under which the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin-American races have attempted to carry out democratic principles, it remains only to be affirmed that, variant as the results may seem, they all point in the same direction. Divergencies and discrepancies are not necessarily failures nor defects, they may be simple stages in a conflict with diverse conditions.

In South America, the three largest republics have attained a good degree of stability, combined with a steady increase of true democracy. They seem to be at least approaching the final solution of their most serious problems.

In Mexico, a country that holds the attention of the world today, even during the first half century of her independence



which was marked with strife and confusion, many problems were worked out and an excellent constitution and code of reform laws adopted. The thirty-four years of absolutism under Diaz was not, by any means, a complete relapse. By covering the country with a network of railroads and telegraph the land was unified and preparation was made for a greater development of its many natural resources; the national credit was restored and carried forward to an enviable position; considerable advance was made in the line of economic and industrial enlargement; illiteracy was sensibly diminished; and the people were made familiar with at least the forms of law. It is to be deplored that, during that time, office was made a matter of official favoritism rather than of popular choice; graft was unchecked; the poor were taught little of either letters or morals; confidence in legal processes for the righting of wrongs was well nigh destroyed, and loyalty to the existing government as an essential element of true patriotism was almost unknown. When to all this is added the fact that by the revolution the worst instincts of the most vicious elements of society were awakened and battered by the looting of cities and farms, the only cause for wonder is that the confusion was not greater when the iron hand was suddenly relaxed and withdrawn. Unfortunately, the man who had the faith and the courage to initiate the revolution and who came into power on the crest of an immense wave of popular enthusiasm was pitifully lacking in the qualities that were necessary for meeting the situation, and was carried down in the vortex whose destructiveness his efforts only seemed to increase. The tragedy of his removal increased the disturbance. To the already numerous groups of bandits were added new bands, some of whom are doubtless moved by the instinct of patriotism to resist the government. To an empty treasury; to the depredation of lawless bands that avail themselves of mountain fastnesses and great stretches of nearly impassable desert and not merely take for themselves money, food, arms and horses, but who kill, rob and ruthlessly destroy the property of individuals, of the nation, and sometimes of foreigners; to private and political plots; to the difficulty of placing confidence in anyone in the

general slump of fidelity; to all this have been added the insidious influence of great combinations of capital, mostly of foreigners, interested in valuable concessions; and the shameless intrigue of individuals who have so far lost all that made man the image of his Creator that, just for private gain, they would deliberately embroil two friendly nations in a war that would be disastrous and unfruitful for both.

In spite of all this, democracy still lives in Mexico, not merely enshrined in the hearts of its people, but as a vital force. When present conditions have been worked out, the great body of sane, thoughtful Mexican patriots will bring their idolized country back to her rightful position of respect and confidence. If others will give Mexico intelligent and sympathetic coöperation instead of misunderstanding, misinterpretation and suspicion, or if they will even let her alone, she will successfully work out her own salvation. In doing so she will give to the world a new proof of the tremendous power of democratic principles, not merely to survive under the most untoward conditions, but ultimately to triumph over every obstacle.